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WASHINGTON-WASHINGTON-A delegation from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom concluded its visit to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City on Thursday and is scheduled to complete its talks in Vietnam over the next week. The delegation, led by Commission Chair Michael Cromartie, has held candid discussions with many government, religious, and civil society leaders, including Prime Minister Nguyen Tang Dung, Vice Minister for Public Security Nguyen Van Huong, Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs Pham Binh Minh, National Assembly Foreign Relations Chairman Nguyen Van Son, Committee for Religious Affairs Chairman Nguyen The Doanh, and Ho Chi Minh City People's Council Chair Pham Phuong Thao.

Although it is not the Commission's usual practice to issue press statements during its trips, the Vietnamese media have extensively covered Commission activities, including publishing an extensive transcript of the Commission's meeting with Vice Minister for Public Security Huong.

Commissioners asked Vice Minister Huong to undertake full, impartial, and effective investigations into reported police abuses, including continued reports of forced renunciations of religion. The Vice Minister assured the Commission that he would take action against any police official engaged in forced renunciations of belief. He also promised to report back to the Commission about the March 2007 beating death of an ethnic minority Protestant.

The Commission urged the immediate release of several prisoners of concern, including Nguyen Van Dai, and Li Thi Cong Nhan, advocates for religious freedom and legal reform in Vietnam; Hoa Hao monks Vo Van Thanh Liem and Vo Van Thanh Long; and Fr. Nguyen Van Ly. Commissioners also asked to meet with Nguyen Van Dai and Li Thi Cong Nhan because of reports that they were being denied medicine and religious materials. Vice Minister Huong arranged for the Commission to meet privately with the two human rights defenders and to inspect their prison cells.

"These are two courageous young people who the government believes are national

security threats," said Michael Cromartie, Chair of the Commission. "We believe their peaceful advocacy for political reform, religious freedom, and human rights strengthens, rather than threatens, the Vietnamese state. We will continue to seek their immediate release."

Vice Minister Huong promised the Commission that an overdue appeals court hearing for the two prisoners would happen soon. "We are confident," said Cromartie, "that the sentences of Nguyen Van Dai and Li Thi Cong Nhan will be overturned on appeal."

The Commission also continued to raise the issue of restrictions and abuses against Vietnamese Buddhists. Commissioners asked Prime Minister Dung to allow followers of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, as well as Khmer, and Hoa Hao Buddhists to organize independently and carry out spiritual and charitable activities legally and outside the government-sanctioned Buddhist organizations. Commissioners pointed out that the Vietnamese government has allowed different Protestant denominations to carry out legal operations; the government should recognize similar diversity among Buddhists, Commissioners said.

Asked if he was willing to meet with the UBCV leadership to discuss creation of an independent organization, Prime Minister Dung indicated that he was willing to "meet with any religious leader" to discuss alleged problems and concerns.

The Commission later met with the UBCV's spiritual leader Thich Quang Do in Ho Chi Minh City, where he accepted the Prime Minister's invitation to meet, saying that he looked forward to discussing ongoing threats and restrictions against the UBCV.

The Commission delegation will continue to Hue, the Central Highlands, and Soc Trang Province over the next week. "Government officials have said that we can go anywhere and meet anyone," said Cromartie. "We look forward to continued access and trust that there will be no reprisals against those we meet."

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

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